WHAT DOES IT COST TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

September 24,1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 14:25-33

"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost..." -Luke 14:28 (RSV)

There is something almost offensive about the question. There is something offensive about the very insinuation that there is a price to pay. We have ample experience with religion's venerable tradition of turning God's grace into a tidy profit, from the well organized sale of indulgences in the Middle Ages, to prayer hankies and vials of water from the River Jordan. In our time we have witnessed the harnessing of the enormous power of television and telemarketing to the old penchant with the result that Jesus Christ is packaged and marketed, someone quipped, like so much soap powder.

What does it cost to be a Christian? There is something offensive about the question! And yet, even as we are reacting negatively to it, defensively, maybe even squirming a bit, I think we know that it is also an important question because we know that the cost of being a Christian for some people has been very, very steep indeed.

It came up, in fact, one time in the middle of Jesus' ministry. It was probably the high point in terms of numbers. My mental picture of a day in the life of Jesus and his disciples is of a small group of people, walking from village to village, dealing with small gatherings wherever they went: teaching, healing, discussing. But, in the middle of the story he was attracting a lot of attention apparently. "Great multitudes accompanied him," Luke tells us. They were there when he taught. They straggled behind as he traveled. They were there at meal time and night time. They were following because of the freshness and winsomeness of his teaching, and perhaps because they found hope in his description of God's coming Kingdom and perhaps they followed because they were poor and had nothing better to do, and perhaps - at least one New Testament scholar proposes - they followed because they sensed a disaster about to happen and they didn't want to miss the excitement. They knew there was a deepening conflict between Jesus and their religious leaders and that it was only a matter of time until the Roman authorities got involved. And that was always dramatic, and interesting.

And so there they were, for whatever reason, following him around, hundreds of them, maybe even several thousand. And one time he turned around and said to them with no warning, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.... whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

And then he told two small parables about a builder who had not accurately calculated the cost of the building and was not able to complete it. And a king who underestimates his opponent and has to settle for peace on his enemy's terms.

Luke's presentation of the story of Jesus is the gentlest, the most human. These are unusually harsh stories and the teaching about hating one's family and renouncing everything seem impossibly difficult. Do you suppose he meant it, that following him means denying what we generally regard as one of our better characteristics - love for family? Did he really expect them - us - to hate our parents, spouses, children, in order to be a Christian? Is that the cost?

We know intuitively that it could not be that. We have experience with cult-type religion that undercuts and destroys basic human relationships and we have ample evidence that when religion does that it becomes demonic.

The simple fact is that he didn't hate his parents. He apparently worked in his father's shop, supported his mother and brothers and sisters. His mother continued to be a part of the story, accompanying him to weddings, following him all the way to Jerusalem. She is still there when he is arrested and as he dies on the cross, she is still there; and one of the last things he is able to say has to do with her care. So of course this one who taught the redemptive power of love - love of brother and sister, love for the poor, love for the enemy - did not mean that his followers must hate parents, children and spouses.

Then, why did he put it that way? The linguistic scholars who know about these things help us to understand that the Aramaic language Jesus spoke was extraordinarily vivid, and that it is common in Semitic language to make a strong point by dramatic contrast or hyperbole. So, of course he did not mean that you have to hate your parents. But he did mean that following him was demanding and costly; that it can mean serious self-sacrifice and it does mean a serious reordering of priorities. What he meant to tell them, and us, was that there is a lot at stake here: the meaning and significance of our lives; that the nature of this enterprise is salvation, wholeness, self-realization, and not just a very peripheral pursuit of peace of mind, or, in their terms, a pleasant two week sojourn in the countryside waiting for the disaster to happen. He used the strongest language possible because the issue is human life.

There is important truth here. There is truth here about the limits of human love. The psychologists know that if the total meaning and significance of your life is tied up in your children, for instance, or your spouse, or lover or parents - if you have no identity apart from them, if you live through them - you are in trouble. Anne Wilson Schaeff calls

that co-dependency and addictive behavior. Parental love that knows no limits becomes smothering, oppressive and deadly. Parents who live through their children - whose emotional rewards are experienced through the achievements of their children - are, sadly, not wholly alive themselves and are certainly not loving those children in a way that works for the child's welfare and health. Part of loving as an adult is to know the limits of love. And there is truth here about life. Life begins, the currently popular adage proposes "when the last child goes off to college, the mortgage is paid and the dog dies." Life begins, the slick magazines promise, when you can afford Gucci, BMW, to ski St. Moritz and drink Dewars. But what Jesus said is that life begins when you find something to live for other than yourself: that full human life is given when a great cause calls out of you total loyalty, faithfulness and commitment. It is the singular Christian proposal that in giving life to Jesus Christ, true life is discovered. It is there throughout the story... It is the Christian counter proposal to the absolute commitment to consumerism which is characteristic of our time. True life is a gift you are given when you discover something important enough to give your life to it. That is to say the answer to the question, "What does it cost to be a Christian?" is really simply everything.

In the meantime the church continues to wring its hands over the fact that numbers are down: that we aren't mainstream or mainline anymore: that we are not keeping pace with competing groups or with the secularism of our culture. When the Bears kick-off at noon, our attendance is down.

Martin Marty, in a whimsical editorial about church growth statistics notes that the Mormons, who are growing, are willing to make 1,500 house calls to produce one "friendly opening" and that the Episcopalians who are declining, haven't made 1,500 house calls since the death of Thomas Cranmer in the 16th century.

And so our inclination is to keep away from these "hard sayings" of Jesus', this unusual harshness: to talk about the benefits of religion, not the costs.

The Wall Street Journal published a delightful article by a Kansas City advertising executive who, with tongue in cheek, has come up with a "marketing plan for revitalizing America's major religious faiths."

"My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong flagship brands like Southern Baptist into one identifiable, Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis - solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and somewhere to go before brunch. After test-marketing various possibilities, I have decided upon the name Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch, for ad purposes. I will not be sure of MacChurch's theology until focus groups are run, but I plan on following the promotional path blazed so successfully by Holiday Inn. In other words, this will be your 'no surprises' church. When Dad brings the family here, he can be sure that they will not be asked to speak in tongues, handle snakes, or give money to the Sandanistas."

Among the ad man's proposals are a new brand of Judaism for baby boomers and a "market segmentation" approach for Roman Catholicism. "RC Light for post-Vatican II liberals, RC Classic for traditionalists and RC Free for those more interested in liberation theology than Papal Bulls."

"Protestantism," he says, "presents marketers with special problems: the individual churches will have to understand that there is just so much theological shelf space, that product differentiation is not viable for go-as-you-please Protestantism. Thus, the Middle American Christian Church or MacChurch." [see American Mainline Religion, Roof and McKinney, p. 229]

Now, no one is quite that bold about it, but there is among us the sense that if we were a little more market conscious, if we stopped asking people to give and started giving them what they want, we might be more successful. And there are plenty of success models to emulate.

Deeper still there is a century's old ambivalence within Presbyterianism about anything resembling a hard-sell approach to faith. Our commitments have been to a theology of grace, networks.

The early Calvinists believed that God had already decided who to save and so all the church had to do was be ready to welcome the redeemed. John Calvin, himself, someone said, "probably believed that most of those who would be converted had been by his time. So he designated 'evangelist' as a temporary office."

The settling of the new world brought the issue to the surface. The Calvinist Puritans confronted a whole new continent and indigenous people who had never heard about Christianity and began to think about their responsibility to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them. But Presbyterians have always maintained a degree of discomfort with the hard-sell school of evangelism. In fact, sitting in the chancel last week when Dr. Boyle announced that next Sunday was "Evangelism Sunday," I thought I detected a corporate shudder and I imagined you asking, "I wonder what they will do." I grew up in a Presbyterian Sunday School and never once saw a new face. The Baptist Vacation Bible School, on the other hand, was flat-out recruitmental with plenty of rewards and incentives for the sales force, my chums, and for potential customers, me.

Our rich history has always kept in tension ardor and order: heart and mind: evangelism and education. We are who we are as Presbyterians precisely because our relationship with non-believers begins with respect for their integrity, not pity at the inadequacy of their religion. And there is an aesthetic aversion as well. "This business of a 'decision for Christ' is for people who like their religion hot and heavy, chiefly those who get overly excited about it all," wrote Robert Raines, "but not for me. I like my religion quiet and always in good taste." [New Life in the Church, p. 40]

But how sad, if for intellectual and aesthetic reasons we miss the real issue.

Because at the heart of the matter is the issue of our lives: Will we live them fully? Will we experience them as completely as we can? At the heart of the matter is paradox that in giving our lives away we receive them; that in picking up a cross and following we are alive as we never were before.

Our wholeness as persons - our self-realization if you prefer the language of psychology - or our salvation, depends on our finding something that claims our passion, devotion and commitment: something big and royal enough to demand everything we have and are.

Sometimes history and circumstance draw the issue very clearly for us. When we visited Dachau last summer, the point was made for all of us eloquently. One of the remaining barracks is the "Priesterbunker," the barracks for ministers and priests who saw in Nazism an absolute conflict with devotion to Jesus Christ, who acted on that perception and who ended up in a concentration camp. And there is not a clergyperson - or a layperson for that matter, who does not look at that barracks and wonder, could I have done that? Would I have done that? There are times and circumstances when the issue is clearly drawn. That was one of them. And so Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knowing what was ahead, could write about cheap grace and costly grace and familiar and stirring but also distressing lines:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Clearly Alan Boesak and Bishop Tutu and those around them, black and white, believe that time and circumstance are drawing the issue sharply in South Africa; and that their loyalty to Jesus Christ is forcing them to say no to their government. I was reading some of Boesak's sermons recently to try to learn a little bit about his thinking because I do believe he is on the edge of the basic theological issue, as Bonhoeffer was fifty years ago. And I was interested to discover that his introduction to a collection of highly political sermons contains a warning about a too eager martyrdom or Christian masochism, "that dark longing within the hearts of so many Christians to be flogged into the arms of Jesus - or into the fires of hell." [The Finger of God, p. 8] That is, we are not all called to be a Bonhoeffer or a Boesak, nor does the issue come at all of us with equal clarity. History and circumstance differ and require different responses.

William Willimon once wrote to the point:

"To be martyred is one way to pay for the faith, but I submit it's tough to pay, day by day, in a lonely, dull, ignored-by-pagans wilting that comes from waiting."

The cost is not always dramatic, he says.

"The woman who devoted her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience's sake leads to prison or exile, these are among the countless thousands, who through the

centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted the text with their lives." [Interpretation, Mark, p. 156-7]

One who paid with everything she had was Eva Jane Price, Congregational missionary wife, in China in the 1890s. Her long correspondence with her parents in Des Moines has been published recently under the title China Journal. It is a fascinating, informative and moving story. She was 33, her husband 41, when they decided to go to Oberlin College with their two children to prepare for Missionary work. She was very human and winsome: wife, mother of three - two of whom died in childhood. She loved God, but she also loved her own life, children and her mother, and the farm in Iowa. It took three months to travel to China so a letter to her mother took six months to be answered. The letters are full of the stuff of our own humanity - the daily details of life in an utterly alien culture - which she did not understand and which called her "foreign demi." And, of course, the relation which caused one of her friends to go mad and another to decide to commit suicide. In an early letter she writes, "Mother, what do you think I wanted the other day? Well, I'll tell you if you'll promise never, never to tell - one of your big aprons so I could put my head in it and cry and imagine it was in your lap." [p. 29]

In 1900, eleven years after they left Iowa and Oberlin College, the Prices and their remaining daughter were murdered in the Boxer Rebellion. In her last letter, as the rebellion closes in on the small missionary compound she wrote... "Our lives are worth nothing unless the Lord keeps them. We are all expecting to die and God is giving us grace, and we pray that you at home may be abundantly blessed by him. We would not choose to die now and in any horrible way, but pray without ceasing that God will choose for us and make us glad to go the way he says." [p. 236]

Time and circumstance do not draw the issue as sharply for everyone. Pray God that we do not have to face the issue as dramatically as Eva Price did, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer did, as Alan Boesak is.

But pray God that our good fortune does not protect us also from the opportunity to decide to live. Pray God that we are not so anesthetized by comfort and security and the orderliness of our lives that we never get around to living them by giving them away.

"What does it cost to be a Christian?" Everything. It means deciding to be his man/his woman with everything you are and everything you have. It means living for him. It means deciding to be his man/his woman every day. It means deciding to be alive.

I invite you to it.